

Module 3 - Preparations and practicalities

Topic 4 - A guide to competency-based interviewing

A competency-based interview is a series of scenario-based questions designed to examine your strength across a number of soft skills. The concept behind this type of question, where you are asked to **give a specific example of a real-life situation in the work place**, is that the interviewer is able to determine how you will behave in the future, based on how you have behaved in the past.

Your job spec will highlight the specific competencies required for your role and the level you will be expected to demonstrate ability to. In the case of a Mainframe Developer for example, you will be required to demonstrate the following competencies, all to level 2 (out of 5).

Achieving Excellence - Level 2

Gathering Information - Level 2

Communication - Level 2

Collaborating for Success - Level 2

Understanding Issues - Level 2

Finding Solutions - Level 2

A competency question will start with something like... *“Describe a situation when...”* OR *“Tell me about a time when...”* **It is important that you respond accordingly, with one specific example, rather than saying what you would, could or should do.**

In the meantime, there are things you can do to help yourself prepare for the competency interview:

- Read and understand the STAR method of structuring your answer. This is fundamental to answering the question correctly, thus maximising the number of points you score. (**See appendix 1**)
- Prepare examples for each of the competencies. Remember; don't use a whole project or something you dealt with over a long period of time. The perfect competency answer will be one element of the bigger picture. (For example – one candidate used the scenario where he had to communicate an Oracle 9i upgrade to different groups of people) (**See appendix 2**) Any longer than that and you will just skim over the surface of the actions rather than providing the detailed answers they need to hear.
- Rehearse your answers in front of a friend or family member. Get them to take careful note of the amount of times the word – WE – is used and replace it with “I”. The word WE should not form any part of your answer. **Never say ‘we’ in the context of a CBI answer!** It's **you** they want to hear about! The hiring manager after all, is looking to hire you... not your team!

Appendix One – The STAR Method of answering a competency-based question.

S – Situation

This part of your answer is to paint the picture of the scenario you are going to use and must not be any longer than one or two lines. You will not score any points for this section. You must also remember to keep it non-technical. A brief overview is all that is necessary (see appendix 2 for example answer)

T – Task



Again, a brief line or two is all that is needed. The task will be your objective or goal and it may also be relevant to mention here if there are any consequences attached to you not achieving it.

A – Actions.

- The Crux of your answer and the only place you will be able to score points. It is imperative that you understand how to form the actions, as a poor answer will affect the level you are marked at and may even cause you to fail.
- Actions must start with “I” and contain a specific action word – such as emailed, organised, telephoned, presented, researched, chaired. If you ever feel yourself wanting to say “liaise” or “communicated with” – you need to break this down again – think; *HOW* did you communicate with that person, what method did you use? (Email, face-to-face or over the phone)?
- When preparing an answer, for the “*communication*” competency in particular, it is important to remember that the interviewer will be looking for a candidate who can do more than just send an email and chair a short meeting. The more detail the better, so be sure to state what other methods you employed. Did you verbally invite people to the meeting to create greater impact? Did you prepare side-notes, pre-meeting reading material for the attendees, a high-level overview or arrange for someone neutral to come in and take minutes? After the meeting, did you email around the minutes, or set a short piece of research for your attendees to work on before the next meeting to ensure your message was understood loud and clear? Other things to think about could include – size of the meeting? Tools used (videoconferencing, slides, overhead projector) and how you documented the meeting.
- Actions must follow in a chronological order. Once you have reached your final point - stop there! You don’t want to get carried away and start talking about a different scenario.
- When preparing your answers at home, actions should read like bullet points.

R – Result

Like the situation and task, this should be kept brief. One line.

Try to imagine you are giving this example to your C.E.O, who would not thank you for inundating him/her with technical information. You would want to demonstrate that you have taken ownership and have the ability to articulate your course of action to achieve the desired result.

Appendix Two – Example Answer.

CBI Question – Communication.

Give me an example of a time when you have had to adapt your style of communication to get a point across.

Situation

When I was at RBS, I was tasked with an Oracle upgrade to 9i.

Task



My task was to explain to the teams (end-users and the DBA's) what was happening to keep communication flowing effectively.

Action

I **prepared an overview** in the form of a flowchart, so things were clear in my own head before I started the communication process with others.

Once I had **created the overview**, I visited the shop floor and explained to the end-users **face to face** what the plan was going to be moving forward. I explained that I required a meeting with them to run through the upgrade step by step.

I then spoke to each of the DBA's **face-to face** to arrange the meeting for the following day – could they all attend? (This allowed me to gain commitment)

I **organised the meeting** for the Thursday with the DBA's and Friday for the end-users.

I **sent an email** with the meeting agenda to all of the relevant parties and booked the meeting room with the admin team.

I then **called the supply office** to **arrange for the correct equipment** to be available for the meetings, particularly an **overhead projector, projector screen and laptop**.

I **imported a minute taker** from another team to write our minutes to ensure neutrality and skills in this area.

To maximise communication and impact within the room, I created a huge **flow chart** and attached it to the wall of the meeting room.

The Thursday meeting consisted of 3 DBA's, a minute writer and myself.

I conducted a **brainstorming** session with the 3 DBA's and myself.

Luckily, one of my DBA's had conducted a similar project so I was keen to get them involved.

Using this person's previous experience, I found it necessary to create **amendments** to the upgrade flowchart.

After the meeting was finished, I tasked each DBA with research to bring to the following meeting (Monday)

With the end-users, I showed the users the front-end with "**screen-shots**" – how did they feel it would work? Someone on this team had also had experience and we were able to make more amendments to the flowchart.

I ensured everything was **documented** from the meetings and their dates/attendees to each amendment made to the process, just in case it needed to be referred back to.

Result



Communication for rest of project was very productive. Numerous brainstorming sessions followed, which ensured the project stayed on track.

Appendix Three- Competency definitions

Please only prepare recent, relevant examples for the critical competencies listed on your job specification. You do not need to prepare examples for the full list below.

ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE: Striving to be the best; continually delivering, measuring, and improving excellence for customers and stakeholders.

INFLUENCING: Using persuasion and building relationships to win support for the benefit of the business.

INSPIRING: Building confidence; directing, guiding and inspiring others to achieve success for the business.

COMMUNICATING: Communicating clearly and concisely, tailoring content and style and promoting free-flowing communication.

BUILDING UNDERSTANDING and TRUST: Striving to understand our customers, our colleagues and other key stakeholders; valuing openness and building trust.

DEVELOPING PEOPLE: Developing ourselves; providing feedback, coaching and development opportunities for others and sharing learning.

COLLABORATING for SUCCESS: Working successfully with others; valuing and utilising the different skills and expertise of colleagues from across the organisation; building interdependence to achieve shared goals.

GATHERING INFORMATION: Continually seeking relevant information and making information widely available.

UNDERSTANDING ISSUES: Using current information as the basis for thinking about issues and problems; employing a range of techniques to deepen understanding.

FINDING SOLUTIONS: Identifying alternatives, options and different ways of looking at issues and problems; formulating alternative scenarios.

